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COMMENCEMENT ESSAY - CLARA LOUISE GUILD

Elements of Weakness in our Republic.

BY CLARA L. GUILD.

The following essay, which was read at the commencement exercises at Rollins College, displays much literary merit, and also shows that the young lady has read extensively and is well informed concerning public matters for one of her age. While we are hardly prepared to endorse all of her views, we are still glad to concede to the writer superior merit as an essayist and a talent which may yet make her famous.—ED. REPORTER.

We are not pessimists. We do not concentrate our attention upon the dark side of things. If there are clouds in the sky, while yet the sun shines, we are able to recognize the shining of the sun, notwithstanding the presence of the clouds. But must not wise persons recognize the clouds also, and be instructed, warned, directed by their suggestions?

Every year we are assured by our patriotic orators that we have the happiest land on earth and the best government the world has ever seen. These things they say truly: but are there not other things and different things to be said, which are also true? Our Republic has unmatched elements of strength; has it not also threatening elements of weakness? Let us see.

Our government, when founded, was based upon the great principle, that all men are created free and equal. The idea of liberty was dominant in the minds of the framers of our Constitution, for the colonists had suffered severely while dependent upon the mother country.

The very first amendment to the Constitution "provides that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech or of the press." The press, in many ways, contributes to our happiness, comfort and safety. Its benefits are recognized, gratefully recognized. But is not the liberty accorded to the press excessive? Its privilege is abused too grossly. Under cover of free speech and a free press, that imported evil called anarchism disseminates its mischief among the ignorant, the discouraged, the discontented. "How hard is your lot," they say. "Why will you bear it? Rob, burn, kill, make insurrection."

In this same amendment it was "further provided, that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In this unrestricted religious toleration, thoughtful men see, or think they see, some national peril. No one will deny that Romanism is taking rapid strides in this country. Its adherents predict, that before long their religion will be the state religion of this nation. They endure this religious liberty, they say, only until their ecclesiastical system can be established. Adieu then—Liberty. The Romish Church is hostile to our system of public instruction. She has never favored the education of the masses. Her pet maxim is, "Ignorance is the mother of devotion." Where this system predominates, the people are kept in darkness. But the general prevalence of ignorance in a Republic would be fatal. The Romanist looks to a foreign ruler, at Rome, for his law; our nation is secondary and subordinate. Such allegiance as that is weakness; enough of it, is ruin.

Under the cover of religious liberty, Mormonism has flourished and become strong. It spits upon the common decencies of civilization; defies public sentiment and the laws of the land, and is a boundless national disgrace. It is corruption and source of corruption. Its leaders have their subjects under perfect control. This so-called Church is a compact organization; shrewd, wealthy, powerful. Look upon Utah, and see whether there may not be an excess of religious liberty.

Another obvious weakness is the wide extension of suffrage. Let us first notice what suffrage is. "Suffrage is a participation in the government." A most important function. One who engages in this high duty, we should suppose, ought to be especially qualified; ought at least to have some qualifications.

Suffrage is extended to both natives and aliens. Many of those, who vote upon great questions, have not even read our Constitution, or if so, do not understand it. Among our voters, countless are the illiterate and incompetent natives. And consider our naturalization laws, one moment. Foreigners bring with them, their social and political ideas; ideas quite foreign to our society and politics, and not at all qualifying them to take part in our government. But the desire to vote is natural to the human race, and the majority of those coming to our shores acquire the right by an easy process of naturalization. They may care for no further qualification than the ability to distinguish the word "Republican," or "Democratic," or "Prohibitionist." Besides, multitudes of colored citizens, rapidly increasing, swell the number of voters who can neither read nor write, much less have any idea of the important questions before the country.

But what of the white brethren, who will not assist them to be better qualified, and use them as mere tools with which to gain their ends, or even worse, who sit idly at home and take no part or interest in public affairs, saying to themselves, "O, there are plenty of others in this country to look after politics." But they are always the ones to grumble, when the election returns come in and are not as they might wish.

At elections, either national or state, have we not the feeling that a cloud is hovering over us, although perhaps not large, yet of ominous aspect? I mean the cloud of corruption. Every one who takes an interest in the country's welfare, sees the evil. But as yet no means have been employed to make it less. Bribery is permitted and winked at; the lower and weaker classes are secretly intimidated, and are obliged to vote contrary to their opinions and choice, through fear of losing their employment. Dishonesty in counting and returning votes is resorted to, on every side. If this is a wrong charged to both parties, does it not show some alarming deterioration in the character of our people?

It will never do, in a Republic, for the standard of virtue to decline and for public spirit to abate. Our fathers who laid the corner-stone of this nation, had noble characters—hence this grand government. To preserve it in beneficence and nobleness, a higher average of intelligence, virtue and patriotism is indispensable.

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Can not the evils and perils we have reviewed, be traced, in part at least, to a single source—that of unrestricted immigration? If our laws respecting immigration were more stringent and more faithfully executed, the evil results would be obviated. The United States appears very attractive to foreigners, as in their lands influences are at work to breed discontent and to drive them from home. The majority of those coming to our protection are of the poorer classes, whose ideas of life are low. At home they were subject to many restraints, here these are removed and perfect freedom is indulged. Naturally, the conditions of such a contrast result in degradation and the morals of our country are greatly affected. Now, ignorance and vice are not the elements essential to the ennoblement and preservation of a Republic.

Observe, again, that it is among the poor immigrants that Mormonism swoops down and finds its prey. Among them, the Romanists find increase, and among them, exclusively, are found the germs of Socialism and Anarchism. Then intemperance, a topic which is of utmost importance and concern in our day, seems to have its largest constituency amidst our foreign population. Let the social philosopher and the statesman, the patriot and the philanthropist, open their eyes to the mischiefs and the dangers of unrestricted immigration.

We are not very optimistic; and, as was said at the beginning, neither are we pessimists. So far, our Republic takes first rank among the nations. But we must bear in mind that the government of a Republic cannot remain good and strong unless the citizens have right principles and are endued with a spirit of patriotism. The cause of the ill success of other Republics lies just here. All children should be taught the character of our government and the duties and privileges of citizenship, so that, when they come to fill the places of the generation now on the stage, they will be better qualified to perform their duty. Education will do much to correct wrongs and mischiefs: not necessarily education of the highest degree, but certainly more than the ability to sign one's name by making his mark. Some will say, "In time all these errors and abuses will be corrected." Yes, time is a corrector of abuses; but at the rate events are rushing on here in America, we must not wait for Time.

Our Republic is not, by any means, upon the verge of destruction; but in our onward course we should ever strive to correct, what if left uncorrected, will assume vast proportions and become ruinous to the nation.

A motto of our country, seen upon some of our national coin, is "In God we trust." No better motto could have been chosen: our fore-fathers honored it, and succeeded in their endeavors. There is more of the divine thought, temper and purpose in our government than in any other. If every citizen does his duty, and fully adheres to this motto, our country will still be blest.

"Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might,
Great God! our King!"